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Tiers of Joy

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Accessibility

Tiers of Joy

Jan M. Ziolkowski

At the end of the last decade I participated in a luncheon meeting to discuss dilemmas that Widener Library faced. The major crisis then enveloping the library was overcrowding: the building had become stuffed with books beyond its capacity to accommodate them usefully or even safely. Economical means of scanning and storing huge amounts of information in conveniently retrievable forms, such as optical disks, lay even further in the future of dreams than they do now. Although occasionally I met natural scientists and social scientists who maintained that electronic publication would rapidly supplant pulp and that the space problem would disappear before the turn of the millennium, virtually all humanists argued that there was an emergency . . . that the storage need would not somehow solve itself. If the shelf footage occupied by books already owned could not be magically reduced, if new books would continue to be acquired, and if no new facility could be constructed in the vicinity of Widener, then obviously the library had reached a Rubicon—or Rubricon, as the case may be. Books would have to be removed to a remote storage site. But what principle to follow in selecting the tomes to be deported from Cambridge to Southborough? The present modus operandi for the Harvard Depository, which requires a constant triage of one collection after another to isolate the materials least often consulted and most easily and completely accessible through the electronic catalog, had not yet been implemented. During the brainstorming, a very distinguished colleague of mine proposed without the trace of a smile that the winnowing should be done on a simple linguistic basis: Widener Library should become English-only, on the grounds that foreign-language resources were consulted less frequently and that fewer users would be inconvenienced by their transfer to another location.

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In this essay I wish to celebrate Widener Library for being anything but an English-only library—for being a library of international scope serving a local community of internationally-oriented students, teachers, and scholars. In glorifying this dimension of the library I admit to motives both broadly political and narrowly personal. The political motivation relates to the current debates about cultures in the United States. In a paradox, many of us profess to be more interested than ever in diversity, when in fact the diverse cultures to which we seem to turn are almost solely subcultures within American culture (hyphenated American cultures); and very seldom do the debates entail any attention to languages other than English, with the possible exception of Spanish. While proclaiming a commitment to difference, students in the United States are gaining mastery of other languages at the lowest rate since before Sputnik. Had the country not in the past few decades

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absorbed vast numbers of immigrants who were not native English speakers and their children who often achieve bilingualism, the ability of our citizenry to engage with diverse cultures in other languages—and I for one assume that full engagement with other cultures is impossible without knowing their languages—would be even more shamefully limited. The drop in the study of languages and the turning of our eyes inward to a narrowly domestic diversity have coincided with developments in international politics that have disrupted forever priorities and polarities that for decades guided the study of foreign cultures and languages. During the Cold War, Russian commanded paramount attention among the Slavic languages. Now its importance has diminished, while that of languages such as Polish and Czech (to say nothing of the South Slavic languages spoken in the Balkans) has risen. Similarly, whole areas of the world about whose cultures and politics we had no reason to be concerned have suddenly arrested our attention, perhaps especially the former Soviet Socialist Republics of central Asia. This phenomenon has replicated itself elsewhere as well, and consequently we should be alert to far more cultures and languages than ever before; but as a nation we are not doing so. We have embarked upon cultural isolationism, partly because our popular culture has such ubiquitous and seductive power, partly because we convince ourselves that we are looking outward when in fact we are turning inward. We engage in the equivalent of navel-gazing while asserting that we are star-gazing.

In the long run I am confident that attention to foreign languages will increase once again, since such study has ebbed and flowed in fairly regular cycles for much of this century—with the turnings of the tide coming unfortunately in response to external crises (during World War II, foreign language study boomed; after Sputnik, the country scrambled to educate people who could communicate in other languages; and the oil embargo prompted a shortlived vogue of studying Arabic) rather than as the result of any collective foresight on our part. This time it would not surprise me to find the urgency arising from economic realities: we might discover that despite the supremacy of English as an international business language, we still need to know foreign languages in order to design and market our goods and services competitively.

Where does the library fit into this picture? If administered with the same shortsightedness that characterizes national policy toward foreign-language study, its budget for the acquisition of foreign publications would have been reduced sharply and the foreign-language materials would indeed have been shifted to another location. Happily, a competing model of what the continent's greatest private library should be has prevailed at Harvard. To draw an analogy between library science and botany, I would laud Widener as a peerless repository of heirloom plants. It is stocked year in year out with the seeds and samples to enable not only today's professors and students but, even more important, scholars of coming centuries to pose questions, make tests, and achieve results. If institutions that record and promote biodiversity are valuable, then so is this magnificent undertaking to collect and render accessible the written records of cultures and the learning associated with them throughout the world.

As has often been remarked over the centuries by both its natives and its visitors, this country is suspicious of intellectuals and focuses very much on the present at the expense of the past. The charges of presentism and cultural amnesia may be

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exaggerated, but they are not altogether without a basis in fact. At the same time this country is one of extraordinary variety and resources. For my part, it is as marvelous that one of its greatest universities—or perhaps I may say its greatest university, since this is the *Harvard Library Bulletin*—has made a sustained commitment to the collecting of scholarly materials on a grand scale that is the equivalent in paper of the genome-mapping project—and that has taken and will continue to take much longer than any comparable scientific enterprise in which the country has been involved. Though fabricated of paper rather than brick or stone, the contents of Widener are as marvelous as any wonder of human devise.

This disquisition, half polemic and half panegyric, upon the holdings of Widener Library leads me finally to the narrowly personal motive to which I confessed not long ago. Well before college I recognized two proclivities in myself. One was that I was attracted romantically to the literature of the Middle Ages and the other was that I enjoyed doing battle with texts in other languages. Both have remained strong in me over the years, even though sometimes the irresistible thrust of Harvard toward the *vita activa*—toward active engagement with the world—renders elusive the *vita contemplativa* of solitary grappling with texts. It has been especially easy for me to indulge these inclinations toward the medieval and the foreign, since I have been blessed by the chronological scope and geographical breadth of the field in which I happened to specialize in my graduate studies—Medieval Latin studies. Furthermore, I have been forced by the happy accident of my appointment at Harvard (split between Classics and Comparative Literature) to cultivate a schizophrenic outlook in my teaching and departmental interactions.

Both my training and my institutional position have encouraged my tendency to range fairly widely in teaching as well as research projects, working now on one genre and now on another, now on one millennium and now on another. On almost every occasion when I turn to the resources of Widener Library, I am delighted and awed. To cite a recent example, I have been teaching this term for the first time a Medieval Latin course entitled "Wisdom and Learning." One week recently I assigned a text known as the "Praecepta vivendi." In preparing for class I read the text itself and all that I could find out about it in recent scholarship. As the meeting of the class drew nearer, I found myself in paradise, which is to say, in Widener with a few hours free and a list of bibliographic items that related to the poem: articles in a German journal from 1913–1914, in a Danish journal from 1960, and in a French journal from 1963; a few pages in an edition of a Latin work published in Amsterdam in 1952; and pages in two monographs, both published in the Netherlands, the one in 1937 and the other in 1971. Thanks to the discriminating indiscriminateness of collection development in Widener over the years, I was able to lay my hands on all of these items in a matter of less than a half hour.

What is true for me holds true for many of my students, undergraduates as well as graduates. In the small courses where I interact closely with members of the class, I can tailor the essay assignments to fit the aptitudes, backgrounds, and interests of the individual students. The back-and-forth that begins in a face-to-face appointment can burgeon over email, with the result being a short list of recommended readings that—thanks to the quality of Widener's collection and the availability of its electronic catalog—I can be sure the students can secure.

Nor is Widener a boon only for small specialized courses. At the moment I have only a dozen Widener volumes checked out and sitting on the shelves of my study

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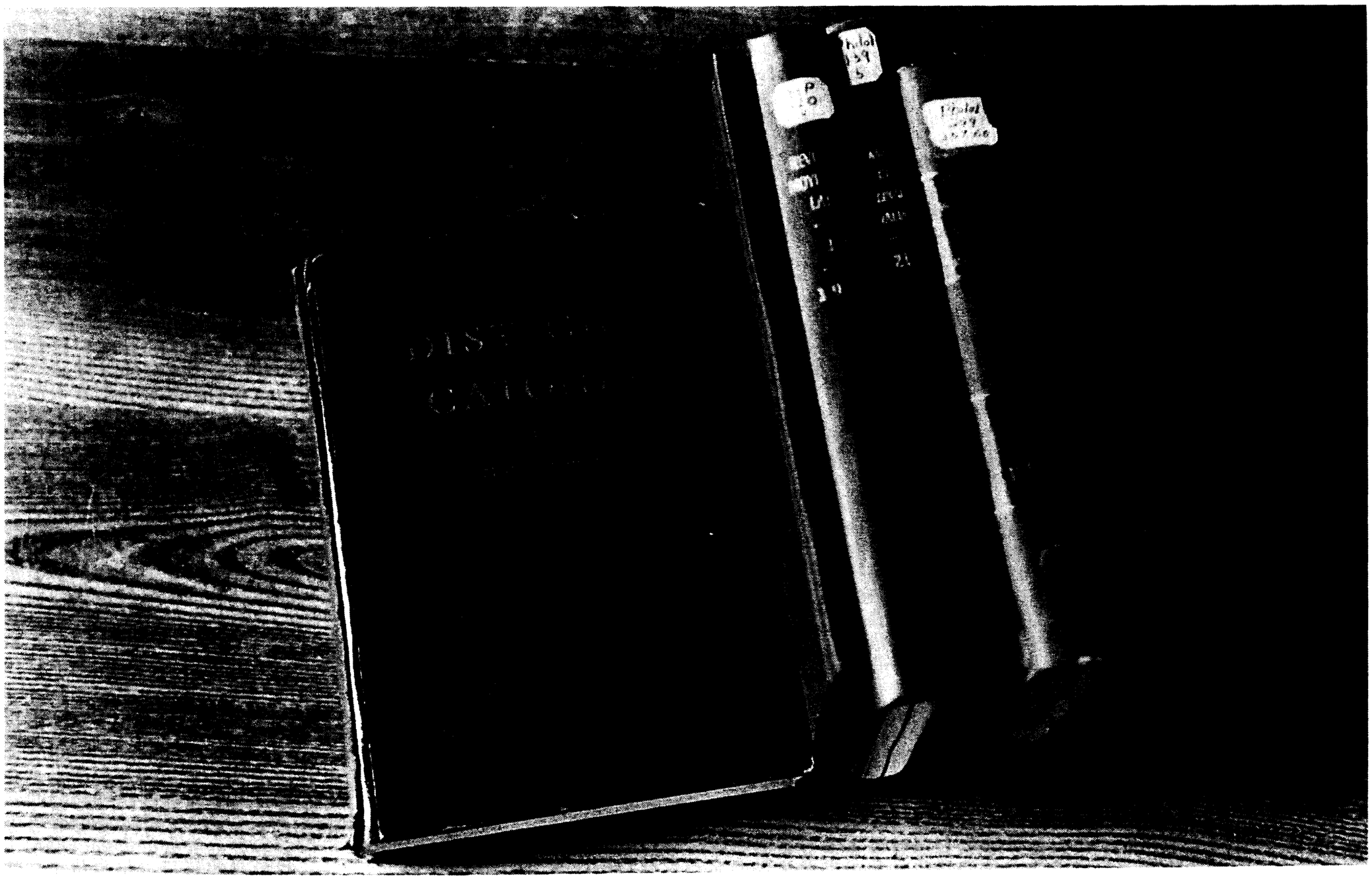

Books in a variety of languages gathered one morning for the author's research.
Photo credit: Mary Lee.

at home. Three were published in England, two in France, one in Germany, and one in the United States. All of them contain plates from which I will have slides made to use in teaching what I hope will be a large lecture course on "European Culture in the Latin Middle Ages," which I will offer in the Core curriculum in the coming fall.

Medieval Latin literature was written wherever Latin Christendom extended, and Medieval Latinists have great latitude in choosing the texts and authors they wish to study: no rule dictates that a scholar must restrict himself to the Latin texts of England *or* France *or* Germany *or* Poland *or* Sweden *or* anywhere else. Thus a first monograph involved me with an author who lived in what is now France, Alan of Lille (known equally as Alanus ab Insulis or Alain de Lille). My second and sixth books were editions of poetry by a monk of Christ Church in Canterbury. The third book was a study of a poem written in early eleventh-century Normandy. The most recent book presented an edition and translation of a lyric anthology written down in eleventh-century England but comprising poems from France, Italy, Germany, and the Low Countries. The scholarly publications that have been indispensable for my work as a Medieval Latinist have included journals of local antiquarian societies and primary materials published by national and regional historical societies. Many of these materials are owned by other libraries in North America; but a significant fraction of them belongs to Widener alone in the New World.

Another direction in which I have turned over the past five years has been the history of literary scholarship. Here I have been no less astounded at the magnificence of the library. Writing the foreword to a reprint of Erich Auerbach's *Literary*

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Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages caused me to delve into studies on the influence of Vico, books on Jewish scholars who had been persecuted by the Nazis in Germany and on German professors who had been exiled in Turkey during the Second World War, and reviews that had been published throughout Europe, South America, and North America when the book first appeared in German and English. Although now and then an isolated item would have eluded the grasp of the book selectors who have toiled so astutely over the decades, Widener owned the vast majority of them. Producing a similar foreword to a reprint of Domenico Comparetti's *Vergil in the Middle Ages* caused me to explore writings on the Vergilian tradition, reviews of the book's printings in Italian and in English, studies of Italian culture in Tuscany in the nineteenth century, books on the influence of Michelet in Italy, and necrologies of Comparetti published in the 1920s in journals of learned societies throughout Europe. Once again, most everything belonged to the Widener collections.

Superficially my chief area of research and publication might seem to have been demoted steadily in the grand scheme of things in the library. At the start of the century the collection of Latin documents that were seen as connecting with the history of the Church occupied pride of place on the sixth floor of Widener: theology reigned as queen. Below them were the Classics, with Medieval Latin literature being appended to the end of the Latin section. In a shift that reveals much about the reorganization of values in the academy (secular humanism!), the Church documents were eventually shipped to the third level of Pusey library—a location even deeper than the Inferno to which the Dante collection had been consigned on D floor of Widener. What must have been a heavenly juxtaposition of Church documents on the sixth floor and Classical and Medieval Latin on the fifth floor has turned into a brutal estrangement: the woebegone library-user who wishes to integrate the Classical Latin world with its Christian Latin successor must be prepared for the aerobic experience of going up or down nine stories and negotiating perhaps a hundred yards between Widener and Pusey; and the person who needs to compare Midrash with Christian exegetic writings has an even longer trek to make. But let me be clear: the distances I have cited stand as a tribute to Harvard's sustained commitment to gathering, housing, and making accessible an abundance of holdings.

Sure, my life and my scholarship would not screech to a halt if I had to fill out dozens of interlibrary loan slips and if I had to collect over years rather than months the research materials that I need. But the kinds of ideas that come to me from seeing one passage in quick succession to another would no longer be there, and the kinds of assistance that I offer students when they are fired up with enthusiasm about a paper topic would be limited: an article that they received three months after the course had ended would not have the same impact on their term papers as one that they could secure by running from their computer screen into the stacks. For the same reasons, the sort of productivity that I can achieve would be lessened. However much the public may cling to the image of the ivory tower and to the idea of pampered professors, I find that many of my colleagues can tally only a few hours a week that they are allowed to devote to pure research. The rest of the time—and we are talking about much more than forty hours a week—goes to teaching, administration, and countless activities that serve the community but are difficult to categorize. For us the treasures of Widener are an elixir: after a few sips

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we are ready once again to respond creatively to the challenges of a constantly demanding, constantly rewarding university.

What materials should Widener contain? There are bound to be members of the Harvard community who are convinced that the nature of great research libraries is changing and that Widener will have to adjust too. Some may contend that libraries will have to devote more resources to electronically retrievable resources and fewer to print materials. Others may hold that libraries will have to broaden their efforts to assemble materials that fall outside the umbrella of "high culture" so exhaustively represented by the Widener collection, and that more of the budget will have to go to films, comic books, and other related products at the expense of scholarly monographs. Here I would express my conviction that, just as universities cannot realistically hope to provide certification in every possible area of competence or to solve all of society's ills, so too university libraries cannot aim to compete in areas where other institutions have better resources. Widener is not an archive any more than it is a public library or a copyright library. It is a scholarly library that seeks to assemble the best of the world's scholarship and, for all of Harvard's many excellences in both its human and physical resources, I would contend that in no other aspect does the University have such preeminence—such *international* preeminence.

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